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AUTHOR Christensen, Torkil
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ABSTRACT

Some problems facing Japanese learners reading English as a Second Language at the college level are discussed, based on classroom experience with first- and fourth-year English majors. In one group of tasks, students were asked to respond to an open-ended question, perform a reading comprehension exercise, and find specific constructions in newspaper articles. Responses indicate that if the students are not familiar with a question's format they have difficulty following implied instructions. In another assignment, students responded to questions about short readings of varying difficulty. Results suggest the students find simpler stories more interesting, have trouble relating stories to their own lives, and are lost when confronted with unknown words. In an assignment in which they were to evaluate the age and personality of and relations between individuals in a text, students who had discussed this process in class performed better than others. Student evaluations of classroom instructional procedures also suggest that they do not consider a general (less than fully detailed) awareness of topic or content sufficient to evaluate a text, and feel full translation, with rephrasing in Japanese, is required for understanding. They rely little on their own knowledge or ability to interpret. (MSE)

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Reading Comprehension - The Reader and the Read in College Classrooms in Japan

Torkil Christensen
Hokusei Junior College

INTRODUCTION

This paper will highlight some of the problems facing Japanese learners reading in a foreign language, English, at the college level in Japan. The purpose of determining such problem areas is to help instructors become aware of what poses problems for students, areas that must be considered when planning to teach reading. The data are responses to a number of tests and other reading related activities that were completed over the last two years. The students were English majors in the writer's classes, first year at a junior college and seniors at a four year college.

Observing and evaluating what disrupts student reading will help enable an exploration of the limits of student comprehension. With the purpose of gaining a better understanding of what students comprehend, and what tasks they are comfortable with, it becomes possible to better approximate the kind of instruction and tasks that students would respond positively to.

Investigating problem areas in reading through student mistakes has a long history, with perhaps Thorndike (*Journal of Educational Psychology*, Vol. 8, 1917) being the most famous. This kind of analysis of errors considers reader mistakes and uses these to speculate about reading processes.

The following will first provide details of various problems and how they were determined in tests and other reading activities. Next it will attempt to determine how students approach texts in

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light of these problems, and finally consider the implications for reading instruction.

Problems with question formats

In one task about 100 students were asked to describe what reading means to them. The question was at the top of a page and was followed by an approximately 30 line long unrelated text selection with questions appended at the end. Immediately after the question (What is reading?), a "box" (approximately 2 x 10 cm) was provided and students were instructed to keep their answers short enough to fit the box, and that the answers could be in English or Japanese.

Only about a third of the students provided responses relevant to the question. More than half misunderstood the question to ask for a title to or summary of the following, unrelated, text selection. About one in six provided no response.

In another question students were provided with a short text followed by a question with three choices in the form:

Is this about photography (1), Niepce (2), or the camera (3)?

It was expected that the students would answer with one of the numbers.

Several questions of this kind were asked, and due to an oversight some had a blank, as in:

Is this about Daguerre's picture (1), camera (2), or studio (3)?

Very few students simply answered with a number, and many professed inability to understand the questions, both the complete form and the one with the blank. Provided with the blank some students showed great ingenuity in squeezing words into the space before and after the 'or'.

These questions were one kind of questions in a series where students were asked to limit their responses to single words from the text. The questions had been constructed to make this possible, and the purpose was to speed up the answering process

so that the task would be completed more speedily.

It was not successful. Not one of the 65 students involved stayed with single word responses. The explanations requesting single word responses, were written on the blackboard (in English) and announced repeatedly (in English and Japanese) before and during the test. The offending multiple word responses were nearly all copied from the text presented with the questions.

In a homework assignment that was started in class, and involved finding specific constructions (cause-effect markers, lists, etc.) in newspaper articles, a number of the responses deviated remarkably from what had been requested. The respondents submitting these unasked for responses confessed that they had not been sure what the task was, but as there were posters with newspaper clippings on the walls of the particular classroom they were in, they had made something similar.

The four instances here indicate that students are very sensitive to the question format, and if they are not well acquainted with a format they have difficulty following what may have been left implied. They do not simply follow instructions but apparently rely on what they have been exposed to elsewhere, and occasionally follow spurious leads when trying to understand what they have been asked to do.

A summary of this may be that students are very unsure of instructions that are not in Japanese, and do not refer to well known question formats.

Comprehension of texts

In another assignment students were asked to respond to questions about short (less than 100 word) stories of different levels of difficulty (SRA Rate Builders).

The first questions asked the students to evaluate their interest level, how well they liked a story, and how well they understood it, all on a zero to three scale. This was done with

some discrimination, especially for the simpler stories which were evaluated as more interesting.

Relating to situations that were not explicitly detailed seemed quite difficult for the students. Asked to respond to the question "How is it to go to Mary's birthday party?" in a text about a birthday party without any direct mention of how the guests felt about or reacted to the party, only one of the 21 respondents guessed that "it is happy." The rest did not include feelings in the responses, rather they mentioned where the party was (outdoors) or who were at the party (neighbors and friends).

Another story about the weekend activities of two children, with explicit statements of how the children were happy to have holidays and disliked getting up for school on weekdays, caused about half the students to include the two childrens' positive attitudes towards holidays in their responses.

In a somewhat involved animal fable with a "bad" fox which is not explicitly called that, about two thirds evaluated the fox as bad.

From this it seems difficult to predict what conclusion students would draw from a specific text. It may be tat they have poorly developed schemata for birthday parties but are well acquainted with animal fables. Additionally, the fox fits the image of foxes encountered in Japanese fables of this kind.

Asked to explain the meanings of words in the stories there was a heavy reliance on dictionaries where permitted and few attempts to use the text where a word occurs. When asked to explain the meaning of "feature writer," based on a text that starts with the following sentence: A meeting of journalists would include feature writers, editors, newsreel camera operators . . ., not one of the 20 respondents suggest "a kind of journalist," but rather provided a dictionary translation or one of the occupations following the word "feature writer."

A similar question about mesquite elicited a response that it is "a low tree of the pulse family," (the text starts: The mesquite, a

desert tree or shrub, stabilizes sand dunes), other responses here were more scrutable, and a few included "desert trees."

These instances may indicate that a text is not seen as an integrated body of information, but rather as a string of more or less independent words that have little effect on their surroundings.

Asked to select titles for the stories the students were very successful, but when next asked to select the two main points from a text, the overwhelming majority copied directly and extensively from the text. With approximately 20 students responding to a story, the responses included all parts of the four to six sentence long story. None of the students opted to frame their own "points."

The above seems to indicate that students find simpler (easier to read) stories more interesting, have trouble relating the happenings of a story to their own everyday, and get quite lost when confronted with unknown words. The ability to determine the main topic of a text and assign a title, seems contrary to the above argument that a text is not seen as a whole. However the observations here may show that while students have a good grasp of the macro structure they are lost at the micro level.

The effect of teaching

In a different assignment students were asked to evaluate the age, personality, and relations between people appearing in a text. For some of the students these matters were first discussed in class and the responses showed the class discussion to have some effect on student opinions. Without the class discussion ages moved closer to the students' and their parents' ages (depending on the character) and the personalities of the characters were unfailingly evaluated as pleasant, as were the relations between the characters.

These responses seem to indicate that students do respond to the teaching of specific matters, and that they have difficulty

"reading between the lines" without specific instruction.

Student reactions to reading instruction

The writer has been teaching a course that centers on the teaching of reading strategies in English. The purpose is to sensitize students to methods of reading that are different from an exclusive reliance on translation. At the end of the course the students were asked to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the course, and a number of points were raised. About 70 students responded and in addition to opinions that were positive and accepting of the course, a number of responses pointed to matters that the students found missing. The following lists those that were commented on by more than about 10% of the respondents.

One complaint was that there was not enough reading going on in class, and there was a wish for a "deeper" reading of the texts presented in the course. The tempo was also evaluated to be too fast with insufficient explanations and not enough reliance on dictionaries.

The homework was evaluated as "busy work," not helpful in improving English proficiency, and relying too heavily on writing. A very large number of students evaluated pre-reading assignments and activities eliciting opinions and background knowledge to stories as irrelevant. A large minority of the students evaluated the course as not sufficiently practical.

Taken together these responses appear to indicate that students do not consider a general (less than fully detailed) awareness of the topic and content of a text sufficient to evaluate it. They seem to expect that to learn what a text has to say they have to translate it in full, and be able to provide a word by word rephrasing in Japanese. Apparently they do not appreciate the contribution that their own knowledge of a topic has in understanding a text. The students further seem to wish to rely on dictionaries rather than to try to guess themselves in

deciphering what they read.

Other factors

This paper does not consider affective factors, mainly because it is difficult to elicit and evaluate these. Anecdotal evidence indicates that students often feel a high degree of helplessness when having to read an unknown text. Students also complain of poor concentration during lessons, possibly due to distractions from friends sitting nearby, and a lack of the pressure that an examination provides. Such negative factors may however be counterbalanced by the very positive attitude to the abstract wish to "learn English," and this may provide sufficient comfort when spirits are low.

How does the student approach a text?

With the above problem areas in mind it becomes possible to discuss how students approach an unknown text in a foreign language, English, and to speculate on what kind of texts students would find meaningful and feel able to read comfortably.

Student reactions to a text and the tasks related to it:

* The appearance and arrangement of the text
  - must conform to what the student is well acquainted with
* The text
  - will be accepted literally without attempts at interpretation
  - is not considered to be related to the student's situation
  - will emerge from a translation into Japanese, and the meaning will be this rephrasing into Japanese
* Difficult vocabulary
  - will be investigated with the dictionary

* Tasks related to the text
  - must be known without specific instructions

The kind of text that would meet the requirements listed here would be on a topic that the student is well acquainted with, and perhaps has read before. The tasks to be performed with the text should be well known and require little reflection, and the text should only introduce vocabulary that has accurate and accepted Japanese translations.

When evaluating student reactions in this manner, it is critical to bear in mind that not all students are constrained by these attitudes towards texts. However, it is equally important to be aware that a sizeable number of an average 50 student class will display some of the characteristics listed here, at least among college level students like those here.

Implications for the Teaching of Reading

In recent years there has been some concern with the effectiveness of reading instruction, and occasionally writers discuss basic principles for reading instruction (one such is R. Williams: 'Top ten' principles for teaching reading. *ELT Journal* Vol. 40, 1986). In light of the above it may then be asked how far it is possible to follow such principles.

Williams stresses that learners learn to read by reading. The above however shows that when left to themselves students will rely on rephrasings into Japanese and dictionaries whenever parts of a text are not completely clear. To have students read by reading rather than by analysing it becomes necessary provide texts that are well within the students ability and to limit access to dictionaries during the reading. This would mean that only a very gradual change in the level of difficulty of texts can be contemplated until the students become comfortable with this form of reading.

Williams also points out that reading proficiency is not simply

achieved by working through a reading textbook, and that both extensive and intensive reading are necessary. This would seem to require that the students have access to large volumes of reading materials at a comprehensible level of difficulty. Then, to get students to learn to read extensively or intensively depending on the text or task will have to be learned. Such an approach would be very different from a singleminded wish to translate, and will require quite some training to be achieved.

Exercises should also approximate cognitive reality according to Williams, here again the student must be made aware of the different skills that are required to respond to different exercises. A sharp departure from just translating into and from Japanese, and also at odds with the reluctance to try to comprehend and grasp instructions before attempting a response to a task.

The reader's contribution to text comprehension also needs to be developed. Rather than viewing the text as revelation, the student must understand its relation to everyday reality, and be able to consciously evaluate this relation.

These three tasks: reading rather than analysing, reading flexibly rather than always relying on translation, and viewing text as an image of reality rather than a presentation of matters unrelated to the reader are three concepts that students can benefit from becoming aware of. Implementing activities that will work towards such goals in teacher centered classes with very large numbers of students, as in Japan, appear difficult. However, an awareness of the goals to work for helps the instructor to evaluate what activities are worthwhile in the classroom.